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# On Mimicry and the Psychology of the Belief in a Just World: Imitating the Behaviors of Others Reduces the Blaming of Innocent Victims

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**Abstract** Innocent victims of crime are often blamed for what happened to them. In this article, we examine the hypothesis that victim blaming can be significantly reduced when people mimic the behavior of the victim or even a person unrelated to the crime. Participants watched a person on a video after which we assessed the extent of their spontaneous mimicry reactions (Study 1) or participants were instructed to mimic or not to mimic the movements of this person (Study 2). Then, they were informed about a rape and criminal assault and judged the degree to which they thought the victims were responsible for the crime. One of the crimes happened to the same person as the person they previously did or did not mimic. The other crime happened to a person unrelated to the mimicry situation. Results of both studies revealed that previously mimicking the victim or an unrelated person reduced the degree to which victims were being blamed.

**Keywords** Mimicry · Victim blaming · Nonverbal behavior · Imitation · Judgment

## Introduction

On a hot summer night, Susan is walking home from a night out with her friends. Suddenly, a man jumps out of the bushes and grabs her. He pulls up Susan's skirt and starts to rape her. Quite often when people read about these sorts of terrible events, they tend to ask whether the victim and his/her behavior could be (partly) responsible for what had happened. For example, was Susan asking for this to

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happen as she was walking alone and wearing a short skirt? In this article, we show that mimicry (i.e., imitating other individuals' behaviors) leads people to attribute less responsibility to the innocent victims for what happened.

### Victim Blaming

Innocent victims of rape or other crimes fear the reactions of other people and often have to prove they were not to blame for what had happened to them (Brown & Testa, 2008). Although people often tend to empathize and react sympathetically to another person's pain or distress (e.g., Berger, 1962; Jackson, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2005), victims of crimes are often rejected and devaluated (e.g., Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Moreover, innocent victims are often held entirely or at least partly responsible for what happened to them. We refer to this process as victim blaming (e.g., Lerner, 1965).

Why do people react by blaming the victim instead of empathizing with the innocent victim? Just world theory by Lerner and others proposes that people tend to blame innocent victims because people have a basic need to believe that the world is just (Lerner, 1980). In other words, they need to believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. This belief protects them from the view that something bad could happen to them: Accepting a situation in which a person is unfairly treated means that they themselves are unsafe and at risk. In other words, innocent victims threaten people's belief that the world is just (Hafer, 2000). Therefore, people's reactions to victims of crime can be such that the victim must have done "something" to deserve their fate (Lerner, 1980).

Victim blaming can be reduced when observers empathize with the victim. For instance, Aderman, Brehm, and Katz (1974) showed that victims were rated less negatively when observers were instructed to think about how they themselves would feel when being in the victims' situation. Thus, empathy seems to reduce that people act in accordance with their belief in a just world. In this article, we build on this established insight by using mimicry, a mechanism which has been shown to enhance empathy (see, e.g., Stel, Van Baaren, & Vonk, 2008; Van Baaren, Holland, Kawakami, & Van Knippenberg, 2004). Thus, firmly grounding our work in these established findings we propose that copying the behaviors of other people should reduce the extent to which victims are being blamed. We further note that because people continuously mimic each other's behaviors in everyday life (e.g., Cheng & Chartrand, 2003), it is important to investigate whether mimicry and victim blaming indeed are related. Before elaborating more on why mimicry may be related to victim blaming, we will first give a short introduction of the mimicry concept.

### Mimicry and Victim Blaming

Evidence for the existence of mimicry shows that we nonconsciously mimic other peoples' behaviors, postures, gestures, mannerisms, words, accents, speech rates, and facial expressions (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Dimberg, 1990). Mimicry influences our thoughts, behaviors, judgments, and decisions of everyday life. One of the consequences of mimicking and of being mimicked is that it makes people

more empathic and helpful to others (Stel et al., 2008; Van Baaren et al., 2004). For instance, Stel et al. (2008) demonstrated that when an individual acts in the same way as another person does, the mimicker can easily take the perspective of the other person and become more emotionally attuned to the other person.

Integrating the literature of mimicry and victim blaming, it can be expected that mimicry can serve as a means to reduce victim blaming. First, as outlined above, mimicry research shows that mimicry makes people more empathic toward others (Stel et al., 2008; Van Baaren et al., 2004). Second, victim blaming research, as noted earlier, demonstrated that empathy for the victim reduced the negative reactions toward victims (Aderman et al., 1974). Combining these insights one would expect that mimicry and victim blaming are related. If this assumption would be valid then it should be the case that mimicry leads to less victim blaming. In this article, we test the expectation that victim blaming can indeed be reduced by mimicry.

Moreover, we examine whether mimicry should be directed at the victim for the possible effects on victim blaming to occur or whether engaging in mimicry, regardless whether the object of mimicry is the victim or another person, causes the effects. Obtaining evidence for the latter process would imply that mimicry effects on victim blaming are not influenced by feelings for a specific victim, but are caused by a general empathic mindset. In fact, previous mimicry research is indicative that such a general empathic mindset exists. For example, it has been demonstrated that mimicking and being mimicked not only affect empathy to the persons related to the mimicry situation, but also to other people in general (Ashton-James, Van Baaren, Chartrand, Decety, & Karremans, 2007; Stel et al., 2008; Van Baaren et al., 2004). Furthermore, Van Baaren et al. (2004) argued that mimicry creates closeness with others which may induce a greater focus on others in general and makes people more empathic toward other people in general. Therefore, we expect that effects of mimicry on judgments of victim blame will occur even when the victim is unrelated to the previous mimicry situation.

## The Current Research

To investigate the effect of mimicry on blaming victims, we conducted two studies in which the amount of mimicry was measured (Study 1) or experimentally varied (Study 2). In Study 1, we measured participants' spontaneous mimicry reactions to a person who was shown on a video. In Study 2, we asked participants to either mimic or not mimic the person who was shown on a video. Then, all participants read two scenarios describing situations in which a person had been raped or assaulted. One victim was the same person they previously observed on the video. Another victim was a person unrelated to the mimicry situation. We assessed participants' reactions to the victims by asking to what extent victims could be held responsible for what had happened to them. In addition, we assessed participants' reactions to perpetrators. This allowed us to explore whether mimicry affects perpetrator blaming.

## Study 1

### Methods

#### *Participants and Design*

Participants were 15 students at Utrecht University (11 women and 4 men, mean age: 21.47 years, range: 19–27 years). They participated for payment (€3) or course credits. Our independent variable was the amount of mimicry participants' spontaneously showed when watching a video of a person. The dependent variables were the degree to which participants blamed a victim and perpetrator for the crime.

#### *Procedure*

In the first part of the study, we measured the amount of spontaneous mimicry; in the second part, we measured the degree to which participants blamed victims and their perpetrators. First, participants were informed they there were about to watch a video fragment of another student who talked about studying Art History. This student described her activities, what she liked and did not like about these activities, and what she had learned during this period. In the video, her head and part of shoulders were visible. While talking, she naturally moved her eyes, eyebrows, lips, mouth, and head. To measure the amount of mimicry participants spontaneously engaged in, participants' nonverbal reactions were unobtrusively being taped while watching the video. Participants were informed that they would be asked questions about the video fragment in a later stage.

In the second part of the experiment participants were informed that they would be judging a specific situation. They read brief descriptions of four characters, two men and two women. These descriptions informed our participants about what majors the stimulus persons were studying and what they liked to do in their free time. In the description of one of the female characters, participants were told that this stimulus person was the same student whom they previously watched in the video. Then, they read two scenarios about a person being raped and about a person being sexually assaulted by one of the male characters. Two types of crime were used to enhance generalizability. The same scenarios were used as in Bal and Van den Bos (2010, Study1). One of the scenarios was about the person they previously watched in the video; the other scenario was about a person unrelated to the person on the video. The order of crime type (rape or assault first) and the order of the person described in the scenarios (related or unrelated person first) was counterbalanced. Please note that the person on the video was a student talking about her study and was not talking about being involved in any crime. Only in the second part of the experiment, we described either in the first or in the second scenario that this same person was involved in a crime or that another person was involved in a crime.

After being informed about each crime, participants filled out a questionnaire measuring the degree to which they blamed the victim and perpetrator. Victim blaming was measured with nine items used in Bal and Van den Bos (2010) (e.g., "I

think she acted irresponsibly considering the situation she was in”,  $\alpha = .78$ ). Perpetrator blaming was measured with three items (e.g., “I think that he acted the way he did, due to the person he is”,  $\alpha = .69$ ). All items were measured on seven-point scales (1 = *certainly do not agree*, 7 = *certainly do agree*). At the end of the questionnaire, demographic variables were assessed. All participants were asked if they knew what the experiment was about. None of them reported anything related to the actual goals of our study. Afterward participants were thanked and debriefed.

## Results

Type of crime, order of crime type, and order of the described person did not yield significant effects and thus analyses were collapsed across these variables. The procedure of previous studies was followed to calculate mimicry (see Stel, Van Dijk, & Olivier, 2009; Stel et al., 2008). Two trained coders rated the movements of all participants and compared these to the coded movements of the target person of the video (interreliability = 0.96). The participants and target were coded independently. First, the target was coded: the observed movements were movements of eyes, eyebrows, lips, mouth, and head. Then, the movements of the participants were observed and matched with the target’s movements using a time limit of 10 s. A participants’ movement was scored as mimicry if it matched the movement of the target and occurred after that movement within the time limit. Thus, if one of the targets’ observed movements in of eyes, eyebrows, lips, mouth, and head at a certain time were also shown by the participant after the targets movement and within the time limit, the participants’ movement was scored as mimicry. Participants’ spontaneous mimicry level ranged in between 0 and 50% out of all the behaviors shown by participant (overall  $M = 30.47$ ,  $SD = 13.27$ ).

### Related Victim

We conducted a regression analysis in which the predictor was the percentage of mimicry (i.e., the number of mimicked movements divided by the total number of movements displayed by the participant) and the dependent variable was the degree to which participants blamed the victim whom they previously watched on the video. This reveals that the more participants engaged in spontaneous mimicking of the victim, the less this victim was blamed for the crime,  $\beta = -.55$ ,  $t = -2.40$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $R^2 = .31$ .

### Unrelated Victim

A regression analysis for the unrelated victim showed that spontaneous mimicry predicted the degree of victim blaming in the same way: The more participants spontaneously mimicked a person displayed on a video who was not involved in any crime, the less they blamed an unrelated victim for the crime she felt victim to,  $\beta = -.51$ ,  $t = -2.15$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $R^2 = .26$ .

## Perpetrator Blame

Regression analyses for the perpetrator of the person on the video and the perpetrator of an unrelated person showed that mimicry did not significantly predict the degree to which participants blamed these perpetrators for their crimes,  $\beta = -.016$ , respectively,  $\beta = -.006$ ,  $ts < 1$ ,  $R^2$ s  $< .05$ .

## Discussion

In line with our hypotheses, the results showed that the amount of spontaneous mimicry reactions to a person influenced the degree to which this person was blamed for being victim of a crime and also influenced the degree to which a victim, who was unrelated to the mimicry situation, was blamed: the more mimicry occurred, the less victims were being blamed for the crime. Perpetrator blame, however, was unaffected by mimicry. These results are the first to indicate that mimicry is related to victim blaming and can possibly serve as a means to reduce victim blaming.

## Study 2

Study 1 demonstrated that previous mimicry behavior is related to blaming a victim that was either related or unrelated to the mimicry situation: the more participants mimicked a person, the less they later blamed a victim for the crime. In Study 2, we aimed to replicate and extend these results. In Study 2, we examined the causal relationship between mimicry and victim blaming by instructing participants to either mimic or not to mimic the person on the video. Thus, in this study participants were instructed to mimic or not to mimic the movements of a person, after which they were asked to judge related and unrelated victims and perpetrators of a crime.

## Methods

### *Participants and Design*

Participants were 39 students at Utrecht University (21 women and 18 men, mean age: 22.23 years, range: 18–31 years). They participated for payment (€3) or course credits. Our design was a 2 (mimicry instructions: mimicry vs. no mimicry)  $\times$  2 (victim relatedness: related vs. unrelated) mixed participants-design. Mimicry was varied between participants: participants were randomly assigned to either the mimicry or the no mimicry conditions. Whether the victim was related or unrelated to the person presented in the mimicry situation was varied within participants.

### *Procedure*

The procedure was equal to that of Study 1, except that this time we manipulated the amount of mimicry. The mimicry instructions were taken from Stel et al. (2009).

Half of the participants received an instruction to mimic the movements of the person on the video, while the other half received an instruction not to mimic the movements. The instructions for both conditions were specific, guided by examples, and were matched for content. Participants in both the conditions were asked to pay attention to the movements of the person on the video. Participants in the mimicry condition were instructed to imitate a movement immediately after having observed a movement; participants in the no mimicry condition were instructed not to show the same movements after having observed a movement. Previous studies showed that these instructions are very effective (see, e.g., Stel et al., 2009), and in this study we therefore did not record and code participants' behaviors.

As in Study 1, after participants watched the video, they read the short descriptions of the stimulus persons and the two scenarios. Again, one of the scenarios was about the same student presented on the video which they previously did or did not mimic; one of the scenarios was about a student who was unrelated to the person presented on the video. As in Study 1, the order of crime type (rape or assault first) and the order of the person described in the scenarios (related or unrelated person first) was counterbalanced. Subsequently, participants filled out a questionnaire measuring the degree to which participants blamed the victim ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and perpetrator ( $\alpha = .79$ ) for what had happened. Finally, demographic variables were assessed and all participants were asked if they knew what the experiment was about. None of them reported anything related to the actual goals of our study. Afterward participants were thanked and debriefed.

## Results

There were no effects of gender of the participant, crime type, and order of crime type and person. Therefore, these variables were discarded from the analyses below.

A 2 (mimicry instructions: mimicry vs. no mimicry)  $\times$  2 (victim relatedness: related vs. unrelated) mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with degree of victim blame as the dependent variable and with mimicry instructions as between-participants variable and victim relatedness as within-participants variable. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and the

**Table 1** Means and standard deviations of participants' ratings of victim blame by mimicry instructions and victim relatedness (Study 2)

Victim	Mimicry instructions			
	Mimicry		No mimicry	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Related	1.22 <sub>a</sub>	0.28	1.56 <sub>b</sub>	0.62
Unrelated	1.26 <sub>a</sub>	0.52	1.81 <sub>b</sub>	0.98

*Note* Means are on seven-point scales with higher scores indicating that participants blamed the victim more for the crime. Means with noncommon subscripts differ significantly ( $p < .05$ ) within each column and row

results of relevant contrast tests. A main effect of mimicry instructions indicated that participants who previously mimicked held victims less responsible for the crime ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ) than participants who did not mimic ( $M = 1.69$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ),  $F(1, 37) = 6.46$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .15$ . There was no main effect of victim relatedness,  $F(1, 37) = 1.55$ ,  $p = .22$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ , nor an interaction effect between mimicry and victim relatedness,  $F < 1$ . Thus, the effects of mimicry were not different for related or unrelated victims.

A 2 (mimicry instructions: mimicry vs. no mimicry)  $\times$  2 (victim relatedness: related vs. unrelated) mixed-design ANOVA using perpetrator blame as dependent variable revealed no significant main or interaction effects, all  $F$ s  $< 1$  ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ).

## Discussion

Study 2 replicated the results of Study 1, again revealing that mimicry is related to victim blaming. More specifically, Study 2 showed that instructed mimicry led to less victim blaming than instructed no mimicry. Furthermore, we showed that effects of mimicry on blaming the victim, who was being mimicked or not, did not differ from effects of mimicry on blaming the victim who was unrelated to the person previously being mimicked or not. We elaborate on the implications of these results in the “[General Discussion](#)”. Finally, as in Study 1, mimicry was not related to perpetrator blaming, suggesting that the effects of mimicry are specific for reactions to stimulus persons with which one can empathize easily (e.g., victims) and not with persons with which it is difficult to empathize (e.g., perpetrators).

## General Discussion

Across two studies, we have revealed the existence of a relationship between mimicry and victim blaming. In Study 1, we demonstrated that spontaneous mimicry affected victim blaming: The more a person was mimicked, the less victims were being blamed for what had happened. In Study 2, we showed that when participants were instructed to mimic a person (compared to an instructed not to mimic condition), they blamed victims of a crime less. The results were obtained when the victim was the same person participants previously mimicked or not, and also when the victim was unrelated to the mimicry situation.

Our findings have theoretical and practical implications. First, our studies empirically showed that engaging in mimicry led to a decrease in the degree to which victims were being blamed for their involvement in the crime. These findings are especially interesting given people’s strong need to justify the way things are and to justify what happens to them and other people, even when this means derogating others (e.g., Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Our findings have practical implications as well. Our studies show how the chances can be reduced that a victim becomes victimized twice. In addition to the harm caused by the primary victimization, being blamed for what happened (secondary victimization) causes the



victim to experience even more posttraumatic stress reactions and depression symptoms (e.g., Campbell, Sefl, Barnes, Ahrens, Wasco, & Zaragoza-Diesfeld, 1999). The trauma may therefore extend far beyond the actual crime. The severity of the victims' trauma can be reduced when, for instance, police officers and people close to the victim would mimic the victim, which reduces the chances that people may engage in victim blaming. Because it is possible that when exposed to a person knowing that she/he is victim of a crime, the tendency to spontaneously mimic the victim might be reduced, we suggest intentionally mimicking the victim as an important mechanism to reduce the level of blaming innocent victims. In other words, we suggest police officers, therapists, and people related to the victim to imitate the victims' behaviors and expressions while talking to her/him to reduce the victims' trauma and to increase understanding for the victim.

A critic might argue that prior exposure to victims, for instance in justice settings, might be limited. Our studies, however, suggest that previously having mimicked a person unrelated to the crime also reduces victim blaming. People nonconsciously mimic and are being mimicked continuously in everyday life, even when other people are strangers (e.g., Bernieri, 1988; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Hsee, Hatfield, Carlson, & Chemtob, 1990). Therefore, it is highly likely that people, right before talking to a victim or being exposed to a victim in court, have engaged in mimicry behavior. Thus, the experimental setting of our studies might be considered artificial, but the mimicry mechanism revealed here may well generalize to the real world. Future research is needed, of course, to examine this possible implication of the current research findings.

The finding that victim blaming is also reduced when previously having mimicked a person unrelated to any crime is in line with previous mimicry research. The reduction in victim blaming does not seem to be the result of feelings for the specific victim that change while mimicking the victim, but seems to be due to a general mechanism. Previous mimicry research showed that when mimicking or being mimicked, a general empathic mindset becomes activated, leading mimickers to be more empathic toward other people in general (Ashton-James et al., 2007; Stel et al., 2008; Van Baaren et al., 2004). These studies demonstrated that mimicry makes people more oriented toward others and enhances prosocial behavior toward others in general, irrespective of the object of mimicry. This general empathic mindset can explain why, in this research, victims who are unrelated to the mimicry situation are more positively judged and blamed less for their involvement in the crime. Because, normally, people do not empathize with perpetrators, one would not have expected judgments of perpetrators to be affected by mimicry. This line of thought is in accordance with studies showing that mimicry does not increase understanding for the emotions of the other person or liking for this other person when people are not open to understand or like this person (Stel & Vonk, 2009; Stel, Blascovich, et al., 2010). For instance, Stel, Blascovich, et al. (2010) demonstrated that mimicry increases liking for others, except when a person is *a priori* disliked. Therefore, we feel that it is not surprising that—although mimicry can elicit a general empathic mindset, increasing the empathy felt for other people—people do not feel more empathy for a perpetrator as most people are not open to feel empathy toward perpetrators in the first place. Furthermore, the finding that mimicry did not

affect perpetrator blaming shows that judgments of victims and perpetrators are not inversely related, that is, less victim blaming did not result in more perpetrator blaming. Moreover, this implies that the effects of mimicry on victim blaming are not due to mimicry causing people to become more positive in their judgments in general.

## Conclusions

To conclude, this article presents a new way of reducing victim blaming: when mimicking the victim or when previously having mimicked an unrelated person, the chances of blaming an innocent victim are reduced significantly. Being blamed for something terrible that happened to you is one of the worst things that can happen and has a tremendous impact on the success of innocent victims in coping with the primary victimization. As people mimic each other continuously in daily life, our findings have an important additional value for our knowledge of processes that can reduce peoples' negative reactions to innocent victims. Whether or not the expressions of other people will be spontaneously mimicked (as assessed in Study 1) depends on the kind of facial expressions that are being displayed, whether the expressions are seen as real, whether people feel empathy and liking for the person and whether the person is regarded as an in- or out-group member (e.g., Bourgeois & Hess, 2008; Likowski, Mühlberger, Seibt, Pauli, & Weyers, 2008; Stel & Vonk, 2009; Stel, Van Baaren, et al., 2010). Thus, if the tendency to spontaneously mimic is reduced, one can consciously mimic a victim as a means to reduce the chances of this person becoming victimized twice. Furthermore, our results imply that when previously having unconsciously mimicked—for instance, when sitting in the train, when watching television, when listening to your colleagues' presentation—the likelihood of reacting negatively to a person whom you see becoming victim of a crime or a person who tells you that she/he is assaulted, is reduced.

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